

Things Seen & Unseen

If you were here last week, you heard me preach from a very similar passage to this one in the Gospel According to Mark only from the Gospel According to John. I referred to that passage as a “love sandwich,” in which the commandment of Jesus that we should love one another as he loved us was surrounded by his predictions of betrayal and denial by two of his friends. I mentioned last week that John’s Gospel is unique – in the other three Gospels, the Synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the dire predictions surround not a “new commandment” to love but rather a new commandment to eat and drink and remember. At first glance, the central message seems not to concern the path of following Jesus but rather what has become simply ritual, practiced differently in the various communities that are pledged to follow Jesus but practiced still nonetheless.

But for most of us here this morning, I think, the ritual of the Lord’s Supper or Communion or Eucharist, depending on which tradition you grew up in, is far from empty. Nearly two thousand years after Jesus broke the bread and passed the cup, his followers continue to avidly observe that custom, some daily, some weekly, some monthly, some with less frequency. I suspect that all Christians of all denominations and all nations have or will at some point in their lives eagerly look forward to “receiving the elements,” to experience the blessing of sharing in eating and drinking these morsels with fellow Christians. The Apostle Paul wrote in his Second Letter to the Christians in Corinth, “we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” In our observance of the Lord’s Supper, however, we use what is seen, the bread and grape juice, to unlock for us the mystery of what is unseen.

How does this work? Why is it that these simple actions accompanied by familiar words all of which can become almost rote still have the power to move us so deeply? Let’s look briefly at the history of this ceremony, not only in our own shared Baptist tradition but across the scope of Western Christianity, at least, for some answers. I’ll share with you my own theological musings on this “ordinance” as Baptists have called it and share some others with you as well. We’ll think about the power of symbol and gesture and somewhere in there, I hope, we’ll be reminded of what causes us to say, “O, good, it’s Communion Sunday.”

I cannot, of course, present an “official” Baptist view on Communion. If there is an “official” Baptist view about anything it’s on the freedom of the individual soul and the autonomy of the local church. Baptist theology is what any individual Baptist says it is and can get consensus on in his or her local congregation. Our denominational resources, even on such a common matter as the Lord’s Supper, therefore, are scant. The Office of Communication of American Baptist Churches, USA, used to print a brochure called “We Are American Baptists,” but that stopped during the controversies over human sexuality. It has only two mentions of our topic for the morning. The first one says: “American Baptists partake of two ordinances exemplifying obedience to our Lord’s commands: believers’ baptism and the Lord’s Supper... The Lord’s Supper, or Holy Communion, commemorates the sacrifice of our Lord. The bread and cup that symbolize the broken body and shed blood offered by Christ remind us today of God’s great love for us—just as they did for the disciples 2,000 years ago on the eve of the crucifixion.” The second mention is even briefer. In a list of attributes headed by the words “We affirm that God through Jesus Christ calls us to be A Redeemed People,” one item says: “who share in the meal of the kingdom known as the Lord’s Supper...” That’s all. The Southern Baptist Convention of

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my youth, prior to the fundamentalist takeover of that organization, had a statement passed, I believe in 1962, called “The Baptist Faith and Message.” It was similarly brief: “The Lord’s Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming.” Both of those statements lean pretty heavily on the idea of obedience to command. Baptists call both baptism and Communion “ordinances,” the same word used at City Council to describe the local laws they pass. Frankly, I’m much more moved by the ABC description which points to the Lord’s Supper as a reminder of God’s great love for us.

As I said, I think part of the reason that our official Baptist sources are so reticent on the nature of Communion is the realization of how difficult it is to come to consensus on such matters across the breadth of opinion in Baptist life. That, in turn, stems from the enormous variety of understanding about the Supper in the Church across time. As best we can tell from the records that have come down to us, the early Church practiced two different worship services. One was derived from the weekly services held in the synagogues, which all of Jesus’ original followers would have attended. This was called the service of the Word and, according to scholars, included prayer, scripture reading, preaching, an offering, and probably singing. The other service was called the agape, or fellowship meal, not unlike our potlucks. It concluded with the Communion, so that it was as much like Jesus’ last meal with his friends as possible.

A good deal of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians deals with problems around that potluck meal and I think it’s safe to assume that the church in Corinth was not the only one that had such issues – rich folks not sharing the good stuff with the poor folks and so on. At any rate, the agape service fell out of favor by the second century and the part of it we think of as Communion was added to the Service of the Word, much as we celebrate it now. The issue then became one of meaning. Were the body and blood of Jesus physically present in the bread and wine? For centuries, the Church’s answer was “yes,” and that it became so at the moment the priest said, quoting Jesus, “This is my body.” When you remember that the official language of the Church was Latin and that the operative words were “Hoc est corpus meum,” you can understand how some skeptical wise guys decided that it was all a bunch of “hocus pocus.”

The great Church reformer, Martin Luther, was probably not one of those who slurred “Hoc est corpus meum” into “hocus pocus” but neither was he comfortable with the official Roman theology of transformation or, to give it its proper name, transubstantiation. Not being willing to venture too far afield, though, he offered the alternative of consubstantiation; that is, that the physical body and blood of Christ coexisted with the substance of the bread and wine. The reformers who followed took things even further. Ulrich Zwingli, the founder of the Swiss Reformed Church, said that during Communion Christ became present in the hearts and minds of the worshippers. Jean Calvin, the French reformer, called the presence of Christ in the bread and wine a mystery. The Anabaptists, the radicals of the reformation, said that Communion was only a memorial, with no “real presence” of Christ. Over the centuries of the Baptist Movement, there have been those who adopted the Anabaptist view, those who followed Calvin, and those who believed as Zwingli.

All of these historical theological niceties do have an impact on us today. Once Protestant churches began to move away from a physical presence of Christ’s body and blood in the

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elements, priests and laity alike were less concerned about the physical bread and wine. It had become the custom in the Catholic church to reserve the wine to the priests, for fear the laypeople would jostle the chalice and spill the blood of Christ. If the wine was only wine, it mattered less – remember, their floors weren't carpeted, so stains were less of an issue. This also enables the unofficial policy of Good Shepherd Baptist Church and many others which I've observed as to the proper disposal of the leftover elements: give them to the kids; they love bread and juice. The nature of Communion also went from Sacrament, necessary for salvation, to Ordinance, obedience to a command, and so daily or weekly observance faded in those churches to monthly or quarterly. I came of age in a Southern Baptist (now Cooperative Baptist) church that observed the Lord's Supper quarterly. Furthermore, the memorialists joined forces with the temperance movement to ask why serve wine at all? Thomas Bramwell Welch developed an unfermented communion wine – you know it as Welch's Grape Juice – and, in the interest of sanitation without alcohol to sterilize, individual communion cups became the vogue as did those unfortunate and tasteless individual bits of bread that were served in the Baptist churches of my youth and which we referred to behind our parents' backs as "Baptist Chiclets." Some modern developments were best left on the drawing board.

So our ritual of remembrance has gone from necessary to salvation to a nice thing to do, from a fellowship meal with all our brothers and sisters to less than a mouthful consumed in silence, from weekly or even daily to monthly or even quarterly. We have drained the mystery out. Writing in a volume called Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy says, "We Baptists are not really big on mystery. Generally we much prefer specificity, palpability, and spiritual exactness—what you see is what you get. We have a penchant for visibly documented reality. Though vigorous defenders of soul liberty and the priesthood of all believers doctrinally, most Baptists still like an orthodoxy that can be carefully defined, meticulously explained, and easily outlined. Of course, the Lord's Supper presents a problem in this regard." Gaddy goes on to say, "...the more I reflect on the meaning of the most basic, simple, and personally significant aspects of my faith, I more and more appreciate Paul's identification of us (in I Corinthians 4:1) as "stewards of God's mysteries." Mysteriously, the action of sharing the bread and cup has remained potent. Why?

Almost regardless of the theology of the officiant or preacher, the power of Jesus' words of institution shines through the centuries. "This is my body; this is my blood." Like Jesus' disciples on that night, we are far from the superstitious belief that eating a fellow creature will endow us with the attributes of that creature. Nevertheless, we still say, "You are what you eat," and we recognize the power of the metaphor of consumption. When we think of symbolically taking Jesus' very substance into us, we recognize that we are offering an embodied prayer that his attributes *would* become our own. Somewhere down deep, we affirm the ancient position upheld in the Old Testament that the blood is the life, sacred to God. To symbolically drink the blood of Jesus means to take into ourselves his very life-force, not only sacred to God but part of God Godself. Whether we follow the theology of Real Presence or of Memorial or something in-between, our participation in the Lord's Supper connects us with that event, with our Savior, in a mysterious and powerful way. The shorthand of eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ as a way to express our need to absorb the ideas and outlook of Jesus until they become our own makes intrinsic sense to us.

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My own understanding of this metaphor of consumption has been enriched, as I've mentioned before, by work done by Jewish scholars and particularly my dear friend, Rev. Steven Greenebaum, minister of Living Interfaith Church, who worship here two Saturday mornings a month. Very briefly, Steven has taught me that the matzoh eaten at the Seder meal, the original model for the Lord's Supper, is regarded as "the bread of affliction," remembering the dire straits of the Hebrew children on the run from Pharaoh. When we eat that bread, as Jesus did, like Jesus we identify with the poor and vulnerable in our land. Especially in times when the poor and vulnerable are seeing the rule of law subverted to endanger them even further, such as today, this reminder of God's call to justice and mercy enriches our understanding of the Supper. Likewise, my friend Steven has pointed out to me that the "cup after supper" was known as the "cup of joy;" a reminder of God's promise for the future. In Christian terms, we can point to Jesus' promise of the great Kingdom banquet which is to come; the wedding feast when all shall have enough and plenty and joy will be unalloyed with sorrow. That day is not yet come but, especially on World Communion Sunday, we are reminded that Christians all over the world, in the past, in the present, and in the future, are looking together for that glorious consummation of God's loving plan.

There is yet another level at which our Communion practice speaks to us and that is at the level of gesture. Both my studies and my experience as an actor and director have taught me that the human body, posed or in motion, often conveys meaning in ways of which we are only subconsciously aware. When it comes to our monthly observance of the Lord's Supper, we are prepared by word and movement. Together, we remain standing after the hymn to pray together in the words that Jesus taught. I move to a position I take only once a month, behind the Communion Table. Something special is about to happen. The hosts for the morning also converge on the table. The words of institution are said. I raise the bread before breaking it. I lift it heavenward, just as some lift their hands when they pray. We know that God is not literally above us – God is here, next to us – yet it is engrained in us to lift up our eyes, to the hills or to the heavens, from whence cometh our help. The bread is broken, echoing Christ's gesture. Music from our hymnal's section on the Lord's Supper is played softly. The hosts take the bread out to you, their fellows in worship. You serve each other. They serve me. I serve them. We eat together. We are, at once, alone with our reverence and together in fellowship, in communion with God and with our fellow Christians. We repeat with the cups. Each time we see the plates coming to us, each time we take them and pass them, each time we feel the bread or the cup in our hands, we feel the heightened reality of gestures which we have seen and performed hundreds of times in our lives. We are connected in our individual and shared present to our past and the past of millions before us, to what's going on today all over the world, to what will continue to be until, as Paul writes, Jesus comes. Can you feel the power, even as I describe it? Do you feel the power when we perform those gestures together?

For me, and I hope for all of us, the Lord's Supper, Communion, the Eucharist, whatever we call it, is a mystery. It reflects for us the mystery of God's love for all of us, no matter how undeserving. It reflects the mystery of the love which binds us together as Christ's Body in this place. It reflects the mystery of our ongoing call to be light and salt in the world, to take up the mantle of Jesus in bringing good news to the poor. It is the mystery of remembrance; the remembrance of Jesus, whose body and precious blood was shed for us all. Thanks be to God! Amen.